



# Factories Behind Fences: Do Prison ‘Real Work’ Programs Work?

*By Marilyn C. Moses and Cindy J. Smith, Ph.D.*

## About the Authors

Ms. Moses is a social science analyst at the National Institute of Justice. Dr. Smith is the chief of NIJ’s International Center.

When someone is in prison, does having a real job with real pay yield benefits when he or she is released? Findings from an evaluation funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) suggest that this might be the case.

Offenders who worked for private companies while imprisoned obtained employment more quickly, maintained employment longer, and had lower recidivism rates than those who worked in traditional correctional industries or were involved in “other-than-work” (OTW) activities.

“Factories behind fences” is not a new idea. Traditional industries (TI)—in which offenders are supervised by corrections staff and work for a modest sum—have been a mainstay of corrections for more than 150 years. Examples of traditional industries include the manufacture of signs, furniture,

and garments, as well as the stereotypical license plates. By obtaining work experience in these industries, inmates acquire the skills they need to secure gainful employment upon release and avoid recidivism.

Another program—the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (PIECP)—allows inmates to work for a private employer in a “free world” occupation and earn the prevailing wage. Created by Congress in 1979, PIECP encourages State and local correctional agencies to form partnerships with private companies to give inmates real work opportunities.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, PIECP operations have included the manufacture of aluminum screens and windows for Solar Industries, Inc.; circuit boards for Joint Venture Electronics; street sweeper brushes for United Rotary Brush Corporation; corrugated boxes for PRIDE Box; gloves for Hawkeye Glove Manufacturing, Inc.; and the manufacture and refurbishment of Shelby Cobra automobiles for Shelby American Management Co. Other PIECP operations include alfalfa

production for Five Dot Land and Cattle Company; papaya packing for Tropical Hawaiian Products; potato processing for Floyd Wilcox & Sons; and boat-building for Misty Harbor.

PIECP seeks to:

- Generate products and services that enable prisoners to make a contribution to society, offset the cost of incarceration, support family members, and compensate crime victims.
- Reduce prison idleness, increase inmate job skills, and improve the prospects for prisoners' successful transition to the community upon release.

More than 70,000 inmates—an average of 2,500 per year—have participated in PIECP since the program's inception. By the end of 2005, 6,555 offenders were employed in the program. Although this number reflects a 285 percent increase in PIECP positions in the past decade, it represents only a small fraction of the total number of inmates in our Nation's State prisons and local jails.

## Does the Program Work?

In a sense, PIECP can be thought of as a grand experiment. After 28 years, the obvious question is: Does it work?

To find out, NIJ teamed with the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance to fund the first national evaluation of PIECP. Researchers at the University of Baltimore compared a group of post-release inmates who worked in PIECP with inmates from two other groups—those who worked in TI and those involved in OTW activities, including idleness.<sup>2</sup> Cindy J. Smith, Ph.D., one of the authors of this article, was part of that research team. Then at the University of Baltimore, Smith and her colleagues considered two questions:

- Does PIECP participation increase post-release employment more than work in TI and OTW programs?
- Does PIECP participation reduce recidivism more than work in TI or OTW programs?

## A WORD OF CAUTION: SELECTION BIAS

Although the results of the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (PIECP) study are positive—showing better outcomes for participants in the PIECP group compared to the traditional industries (TI) and the other-than-work (OTW) groups—they do not definitively show that the better outcomes were due to PIECP itself. This is because the participants in the three groups were not randomly assigned to the groups, a process that ensures that the differences in results are due to the program, rather than to preexisting differences among the participants.

How then were participants in this study assigned to the different groups? First, prisoners volunteered to participate in a work program. They were then interviewed by prospective employers in both the TI program and PIECP. Therefore, inmates who worked in either the TI program or PIECP were “self-selected” and may have had different motivations and backgrounds than the OTW inmates, the third group studied, which may have led to better outcomes. This concern, known as selection bias, can be definitively ruled out only by random assignment to groups that are going to be compared. In this study, selection bias seems a larger concern when comparing the volunteers (that is, PIECP and TI participants) to the non-volunteers (the OTW group) than in comparing the results of the two employment (PIECP and TI) groups.

The researchers in this study attempted to ensure that the groups were comparable by matching inmates in the three groups using a number of factors, including demographics and time served. Nevertheless, this matching may not have completely eliminated the selection bias. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Although the findings are not conclusive, they are positive. (See sidebar, “A Word of Caution: Selection Bias.”) Researchers found that, after they were released, PIECP participants found jobs more quickly and held them longer than did their counterparts in the TI and OTW groups. Approximately 55 percent of PIECP workers obtained employment within the first quarter after release. Only 40 percent of their counterparts found employment within that time.

Nearly 49 percent of PIECP participants were employed continuously for more than 1 year, whereas 40.4 percent of the offenders in TI and 38.5 percent of the offenders in OTW programs were continuously employed for that length of time.

### Length of Continuous Employment Postrelease

Length of Employment	Percent of PIECP Group	Percent of Traditional Industries Group	Percent of Other-Than-Work Group
1 year+	48.6	40.4	38.5
3 years+	13.7	10.3	10.3

Three years out, PIECP participants performed better than releasees from the TI or OTW groups. Almost 14 percent of PIECP releasees were employed for 3 continuous years, but only 10.3 percent of the other offenders maintained constant employment for that same period of time. (See chart above, "Length of Continuous Employment Postrelease.")

Examining wages earned by the participants after they were released, the researchers found that the PIECP group earned more than the TI and OTW groups. Of all the releasees, however, 55 percent did not earn wages equal to a full-time job at the Federal minimum wage. Because the data available to the researchers reported total earnings only and not the number of hours worked, it was impossible to determine whether this was because the releasees were: (1) working part-time, (2) working intermittently, or (3) earning less than the Federal minimum wage.

### Recidivism

The researchers measured recidivism rates for all three groups using the traditional yardsticks: new arrest, conviction, and incarceration.<sup>3</sup> The results showed that PIECP releasees had lower rates of rearrest, conviction, and incarceration than offenders who were in the TI or the OTW groups.

At the end of the first year postrelease, 82 percent of PIECP participants were arrest free. The average amount of time from release to first arrest for PIECP participants was approximately 993 days (slightly less than 3 years). At 1 year postrelease, offenders in the TI and OTW groups remained arrest free at approximately the same rate (77 percent and 76 percent, respectively) as PIECP participants. By

3 years out, however, the arrest-free rates for all three groups declined to 60 percent for the PIECP participants and 52 percent for offenders in the TI and OTW programs.

Looking at conviction and reincarceration rates, the researchers found that 77 percent of PIECP participants were conviction free during the followup periods, compared to 73 percent of the OTW group. Ninety-three percent of PIECP participants remained incarceration free during the followup periods, compared to 89 percent of the OTW participants.

### Inmate PIECP Wages

Wages earned by PIECP participants in prison benefit taxpayers in addition to helping the inmates themselves. Although the program requires a percentage of PIECP wages to be saved to assist the inmate when he is released, the remaining wages make their way back into the national economy, either directly or indirectly. A significant portion of the wages earned by prisoners in the program, for example, goes directly to the State to cover the cost of prisoner room and board. PIECP wages also provide child support and alimony to family members, as well as restitution to crime victims. (See chart on p. 35, "Distribution of PIECP Wages.")

### An Underutilized Rehabilitation Option?

The research suggests that PIECP has been successful. Inmate PIECP wages benefit inmates, taxpayers, victims, families, and States. PIECP participants also acquire postrelease jobs more quickly, retain these jobs longer, and return to the criminal justice system less frequently and at a lower rate than inmates who worked in traditional

## Distribution of PIECP Wages

### INDIRECT TAXPAYER BENEFITS

Net Pay\*  
\$205,714,532

Inmate mandatory savings†  
\$14,401,263

### DIRECT TAXPAYER BENEFITS

Taxes paid (Federal, State, local)  
\$48,213,823

Federal victims fund  
\$34,233,344

Room & board  
(reimbursed to the State)  
\$101,043,422

Family support (child support,  
alimony, and other restitution)  
\$22,223,943

Source: Data compiled (under OJP/BJA grant number 2006-DD-BX-K010) by Sahra Nadiir, program coordinator of the National Correctional Industries Association's PIECP, based on information submitted to the Bureau of Justice Assistance by PIECP certificate holders.

\* An inmate's net pay covers his living expenses, such as food and toiletries, and some health care costs, such as co-pays and prescription drugs. Typically, the money to pay for such expenses would come from taxpayers.

† Under PIECP, 10 percent of a PIECP participant's wages is set aside for the inmate's use upon release.

industries or engaged in other-than-work activities. These findings suggest that PIECP is an underutilized rehabilitation option and that additional efforts to increase the number of PIECP jobs could have an important impact on the Nation's prison and jail populations.

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### For More Information

- Smith, C.J., J. Bechtel, A. Patrick, R.R. Smith, and L. Wilson-Gentry, *Correctional Industries Preparing Inmates for Re-entry: Recidivism and Post-release Employment*, final report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, Washington, DC: June 2006 (NCJ 214608), available at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/214608.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/214608.pdf).
- Petersik, T., T. Nayak, and M.K. Foreman, *Identifying Beneficiaries of PIE Inmate Incomes*, The National Correctional

Industries Association, July 31, 2003, available at [www.nationalcia.org/researchfullrpt.pdf](http://www.nationalcia.org/researchfullrpt.pdf).

### Notes

1. With the exception of PIECP, U.S. jail and prison inmates are prohibited, under the Amhurst-Sumners Act of 1935, from producing goods for sale in open interstate commercial markets; PIECP-certified programs are exempt from the \$10,000 limit on the sale of prisoner-made goods to the Federal Government.
2. The sample size included 6,464 inmates, with subjects nearly equally divided among groups. The sample included offenders released from 46 prisons in 5 States that implemented PIECP from January 1, 1996, to June 30, 2001. The followup period began on the day the inmate was released and ranged from slightly under 2 years to 7.5 years.
3. Technical violations were not considered new arrests.